D’var Torah for Kabbalat Shabbat April 24, 2020

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Our Torah portion offers us a strange array of instructions, all concerning *tzara’at*, or scaly affections of the skin, the scalp, even clothing and the walls of houses. In every case, the kohen or priest is brought in to determine the extent of the infection. If necessary, he quarantines the individual and re-tests seven days later. He keeps re-testing until the Torah’s ultimate goal can be achieved: reintegrating the ill person into society; healing the person’s body AND soul. *R’fu’at hanefesh u’r’fu’at haguf.*

If the affection appears as greenish streaks on the walls of a house, the walls are scraped. If that doesn’t work, the walls are taken out. Ultimately, the entire house might have to be torn down and rebuilt.

But if that’s strange, then a comment by Rashi on this section is stranger still. Rashi says that the announcement of God’s inflicting an eruptive plague on a house is actually a means of conveying good news. For, says Rashi, the Amorites hid golden treasure inside the walls of their houses during the forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness. The appearance of this eruptive plague would cause the new Jewish owner of the house to tear it down, at which point he would find the treasure.

So Rashi. Is there any historical truth in his statement? If there is, we can’t begin to corroborate it. Why would Rashi say such a thing, even if he believed it to be true? As we used to say back in rabbinical school, *mah kasheh l’rashi?* What is Rashi’s question to which this is the elusive answer?

The S’fas Emes comes to the rescue. The S’fas Emes is Rabbi Yehuda Arye Leib of Ger, the third Gerer rebbe, who served a great community just outside of Warsaw and who died around 1905. He says as follows:

Did the Creator of the universe need to resort to such contortions? The real meaning of these afflictions is quite wondrous, a demonstration that Israel’s holiness is so great that they can also draw sanctity and purity into their dwelling places. That is just what Israel did when they brought the Land of Canaan forth from defilement and into the realm of holiness. Then it became the Land of Israel, and the blessed Creator caused the *shekhinah*, the holy presence, to dwell in the Temple, among the people, and throughout the land.

This, says the S’fas Emes, is what the Torah means by *uv’chol m’odecha*, “and with all your might.” We have to use all our might to bring the light of holiness into all of our possessions. A plague of so-called “leprosy” can fall upon our houses too. The announcement that there is such a plague is the good news that we have the spiritual tools to redeem all of those places.

This, he says, is the real hidden treasure that Rashi must have been referring to: that in the most corporeal of objects there are hidden sparks of the greatest holiness.

Thank you, S’fas Emes. But does that mean that there is some hidden treasure in our current plague? We can be forgiven for not feeling that way. It is a terrible curse, especially for the poor, the elderly, the uninsured, the food-insecure, and the homeless.

The hidden treasure lies, perhaps, in our discovering the extraordinary generosity and creativity of average people to come to one another’s aid. Within our hospitals and nursing homes, our houses of worship, education, community organizing, and local government are tireless individuals who bombard one another day and night with ideas for new ways to help those suffering from this elusive plague.

May they continue to “take down the walls” of the houses that divide us, and rebuild them with social structures that bring us closer to the divine light, the *shekhinah* that desperately wants to come in and dwell among us.